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I believe I read your short stories first. What attracted me to those stories or whatever I read—I have short-term memory loss, you have to understand, I'm 86, so I get to forget things—was how startled I was by the language. It was so real and intelligent and wild. There was the wildness as well as some deep intelligence, and I didn't think the combination of the two was possible in recent literature. Yours struck quite immediately and it wasn't just the combination of words from Santo Domingo or curse words or grammatical [uniqueness]. It was provocative but there was something so human in the nostalgia and in the knowing of human beings. I don't know anybody who writes like that, the way you do, but it's very fetching, and I look forward to more, and more, and more.

Toni Morrison, on Junot Díaz (2017)

I saw our struggles and dreams all tangled up in the same failure, and that failure was called joy.

Roberto Bolaño, *The Savage Detectives* (2007)

Contents

Preface

In January 2017, President Barack Obama explained to Michiko Kakutani of the *New York Times* that Junot Díaz—along with Dave Eggers, Barbara Kingsolver, Jhumpa Lahiri, Zadie Smith, and Colson Whitehead—had helped him get through his eight vexed years as the first African American president of the United States. Díaz's fiction, Obama said, helped him understand "a very particular immigrant experience" in which Díaz's Dominican American characters longed "for this better place" while also "feeling displaced."[1] And although Díaz's characters found expression in his well-crafted fiction, the story of Díaz himself is still in process: in all likelihood, the writer-activist, professor, and immigrant will in the coming years write more novels, craft more short-story collections, publish more essays, and unveil still-unknown parts of himself: the sources of his lifelong depression, the contours of his inventive imagination. The truths of those works are the future's to unpack: a goal of this book is to help light the way.

I started writing this book years ago, during a historical moment that now feels a lifetime away: January 2010, only two years into President Obama's first term. In one of my early drafts of the preface, I began with a notice: readers attempting to find revelations about Junot Díaz would be disappointed. However, Díaz's autobiographical essay "The Silence: The Legacy of Childhood Trauma," published in the *New Yorker* in 2018, changed everything. In his essay Díaz revealed that at eight years old, he had been raped by a "grownup" that he "truly trusted"; the resulting psychological traumas followed him for decades. As a result of his sexual "violación," as he called it in Spanish, Díaz confessed that he not only had suffered from a lifetime of terror, depression, agony, shame, self-recrimination, addiction, and "asco [disgust]" but that it "casi me destruyó." At eleven, he suffered uncontrollable rage; by thirteen, he had stopped "being able

to look at himself in the mirror"; and by fourteen, he had put one of his father's guns to his head. Díaz emphasized that throughout his adolescence he had nightmares about endless rapes: attacks by his brothers, his father, his teachers, and his school friends. By high school, Díaz, once a student enrolled in its gifted-and-talented program, had been booted out for truancy. He returned to Stephen King novels for solace, though to no avail; again, he attempted to kill himself by "swallowing all these leftover drugs" from his older brother Rafael's cancer treatments. By the time he enrolled at Rutgers, Díaz had not only buried the boy who was raped but had also worked to "lock" his traumas behind what he characterized as "an adamantine mask of normalcy."[2] That "normalcy," as one might imagine, was itself a weighty fiction: through his graduate schooling, his professional activities, and his intimate life, nightmares, self-blame, secrecy, and "suicidal ideation" followed.

The immediate responses to Díaz's "The Silence" on Twitter and Facebook were polarized. Some responses were thankful that the essay's narrator, Díaz himself, was honest about having experienced sexual trauma, was open about having been in pain for most of his life. Relatedly, some readers saw in Díaz's piece a larger social body in pain, lost, suffering, living in quiet desperation. However, other responses focused not on Díaz's personal revelation but rather what read as incidental in the essay: Díaz's failed relations with a series of lovers over a ten-year period—women named only with single letters and dashes ("X—," "Y—," or "S—," etc.). These readers of the essay asked why Díaz's partners were so easily reduced to objects, assemblages, and "señales"—objects to be used only as signifiers that helped him come to self-consciousness and, with therapy, to recovery. Why did so many broken men of color (like Toni Morrison's Paul D in *Beloved*) need women of color to be made whole again?

Soon after Díaz's *New Yorker* essay appeared, the writer and instructor of creative writing Zinzi Clemmons stood up at a writer's conference and asked Díaz why he had treated her badly some six years before. A few hours later, she specified the behavior to which she was referring on Twitter, saying that he had forcibly kissed her when she was a graduate student.[3] Her claim then set off another accusation of "enraged" bullying behavior: at the University of Iowa Workshop, Díaz had disagreed with an audience member, Carmen María Machado, who had accused him of being the same as his misogynist fictional characters.[4]

A few weeks later the writer and professor of creative writing Shreerekha Subramanian "outed" herself as one of the former "ghost-lovers." Identifying herself as "S—" in Díaz's essay "The Silence," she claimed he had sworn "her to silence" during their relationship, when she was a graduate student. In her telling, Díaz, some ten years after their relationship had ended, still vis-

ited and communicated with her (when he came through her city), "speak[ing] about our past and say[ing] what he already said hundreds of times to one another—my hurt, his apology, his trauma" till kingdom come. She laid out her fuller sense of Díaz's and her own behavior—"I never ran towards him, I never did fully run away"—and claimed that Díaz had broken off their relationship because as a South Asian immigrant she "was not black enough for him."[5]

By these and some other reviewers' accounts, critics posited that Díaz's behavior of bullying, shaming, and aggressive advances was appalling and that his imaginative work thematized and championed patriarchal normalization and uncritical misogyny. Nobody is arguing against Díaz's appalling behavior—myself included. However, I do argue that Díaz's *fiction* allows readers to confront heteropatriarchal dominance in our culture and society. In the words of decolonial feminists Yomaira C. Figueroa-Vásquez and Paula M. L. Moya, Díaz's fiction empowers readers "to bear witness to the ways in which coloniality exerts power over and commits violence upon bodies deemed to be insignificant" (Figueroa-Vásquez) and to theorize "race and intersectionality" in our postcontemporary moment (Moya).[6]

Almost overnight, calls for the boycotting of Díaz's fiction went viral. On Facebook and Twitter, Díaz was cast as a "bizarre person, a sexual predator, a virulent misogynist, [and] an abuser and aggressor."[7] In an op-ed piece in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, a number of prominent Latinx and South Asian feminist scholars responded to these portrayals by calling for more patient consideration, criticizing the viral admonitions of Díaz's "pathological behavior" as part of a broader infrastructure of snap judgment.[8] And as this book goes to press, the debate about Díaz's behavior and future career has in fact quieted, for Díaz has been cleared by all the institutions with which he works even as detractors have succeeded in marginalizing him.[9] In no uncertain terms, the accusations against Díaz are serious, and he needs to be held accountable for whatever he may have done, may be doing, and may still do. "Sexist behavior, whether slight or severe," philosopher Linda Martín Alcoff wrote in a front-page *New York Times* online opinion, is "never acceptable or excusable. Sexism in every form weakens liberatory movements, fractures solidarity and exacerbates the oppression of the oppressed."[10] In its November 2018 review of the allegations against Díaz, the Pulitzer Board unanimously found no evidence or reason to remove him and invited him back.[11] Assessing the validity of each accusation against Díaz is beyond the scope of this literary study.[12] Addressing the importance and volume of their expression of rage and pain, however, is part of what this book of literary criticism on Díaz's fiction and intellectual formation attempts to describe: the historical traumas passed like cursed heir-

looms among our aggrieved communities and the ever-pressing need for decolonial love.

I don't pretend in these pages to look prophetically into the future and critically analyze Díaz's still-unfolding writing career. I mostly look backward (for one can only predict the past) from Díaz's early years in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, and his public-school education in Parlin, New Jersey, to the present moment. Through an interpretive commentary that restricts itself to the repertoire of meanings in Díaz's texts, I explore how the role of the imagination is crucial to the functioning of his fiction. He allows us to experience what Winfried Fluck calls a "negative aesthetics" (not something literally represented), compelling readers to provide links across the many gaps, blanks, and páginas en blanco created by the author's suspensions of relations of meaning.[13] What emerges is a book about Díaz as the inventor of an expansive fictional cosmos, an anatomist of coloniality in the Américas, and a tormented and anguished writer staving off depression, shame, anguish, and addiction—and eventually producing *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, one of the most influential novels of our time.

Here is this book's genesis. In 2003, Díaz, along with Edwidge Danticat, had been invited to the University of California, Berkeley, where I taught at the time, to be the keynote speakers at a conference organized by graduate students in the departments of history and comparative literature. I, too, had been asked by the conference organizers to join Díaz and Danticat as a keynote speaker. Although I had taught Díaz's debut book of stories *Drown* and Danticat's *Krik? Krak!*, I had not met either writer before.

Fast-forward to the end of the decade. Díaz had by then published to great fanfare and critical acclaim his novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. I had moved midyear to Stanford University and had written, during the 2010 winter quarter, a long draft of an essay conjecturing on world literature and Díaz's concept of the fukú americanus. I emailed Díaz to share my essay with him that was about to appear in the journal *Global South*. Díaz read the work and commented on its strengths and weaknesses.

A year later, in March 2011, I sent Díaz a version of another essay in which I discussed a footnote in his novel in which the Dominican American character Yunior de Las Casas observed Oscar de León reading science fiction in the closet and underachieved masculinity and hypermasculinity. Díaz sent me a three-paragraph email response in which he thought my essay was "lit": he explained that the characters Oscar and his college roommate Yunior had had their masculinity "transmuted" by "our post-work stage of capitalism into ex-

treme hypermasculine performance." This "ratchet[ed] up the pressure against things like reading and being smart." He then commented that although some boys of color are being "liberated" by hipsters like Drake, "the rest are being fettered by these identities which don't permit such perversions as 'being smart.'"[14]

With this, I was hooked. Díaz explained that he honestly felt that amid all the essays that were being written, sent to him, and published about his work—for all of which he was very touched and grateful—he had not yet read anyone who was really "digging" into his texts' meat and bones: "I didn't work so long because I WASN'T trying to challenge some of the ways I was to conceive my African diasporic post-colonial Caribbean Dominican poor NJ smart-kid identity."[15] That was when I decided to read all his books and short stories, essays, and interviews. I read everything, including "Negocios," the noncirculating MFA thesis he had completed in 1995 at Cornell, and I was struck by the texts' complex styles, tones, and atmospheres, or what Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht calls "Stimmung," or "mood."[16]

Fast-forward again to late 2011. Díaz's work had by then appeared to global fanfare. He had received a Pulitzer Prize for his debut novel, and he had won a MacArthur Fellowship. Díaz's fiction was receiving worldwide attention. As I taught his work, one thing came into clearer focus. I knew I had to ponder the arc of his immigrant (diasporic) writing career.

To figure this out, I decided, along with my Latinx studies colleagues Monica Hanna and Jennifer Harford Vargas, to invite Díaz to Stanford in 2012 to give a distinguished lecture and to hold the first symposium on his work. After these events, all of us came away amazed with his address on race, difference, and Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, his "decolonial turn"[17] in writing *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, and his future-leaning imaginative work on zombies and decolonial love.

I did not interview him; however, he agreed to answer my questions about his life and his family so that I might get all the facts straight. In the years since, Díaz read and commented on the penultimate draft of this book while remaining detached, unlike in his early emails, from my interpretations of his work.[18] But I have been extremely fortunate, for Díaz read the draft of my manuscript with care, occasionally correcting some errors about his family and some of my rhetorical infelicities but never confirming or critiquing my literary criticism.

As I have prepared this book for production, I have often been asked why I am attending to the life and work in progress of a living, breathing writer at the peak of his creativity and his fall from grace as one of the leading American writers of his generation.[19] In my first and last books, on the dialectics of the America that is ours and not ours and on trans-Americanity, I attended to

something much bigger: those books sought to articulate what such writers as Gloria Anzaldúa, Alejo Carpentier, Sandra Cisneros, Gabriel García Márquez, José Martí, Cherríe Moraga, Toni Morrison, Américo Paredes, John Rechy, Roberto Fernández Retamar, El Vez, and Helena María Viramontes had in common as diasporic and borderlands writers in the Américas. This book on Díaz is a kindred effort, though on a much smaller scale. It focuses on the fluid relations between the immigrant and diasporic ruptures in Díaz's life and on those of the Afro-Atlantic Dominican characters in his books who are connected by diegetic continuities.[20] It sits with, as President Obama noted, the distressing and the hopeful in Junot Díaz's books about Latinx immigrant belonging in the United States.

This book follows the writer through his childhood, through his college and graduate-school experiences at Rutgers, and through his time in Cornell's MFA program, arriving at the writer we know today. The Anthropocene, Anzaldúa and Moraga's "theory in the flesh," Césaire, Cisneros, Fanon, Iser, Mongooses, Morrison, *NBC's Late Night with Seth Meyers*, "negative aesthetics," Sauron, Tolkien, and Trujillo all play their part in this historia. But my framework supports my critical focus on Díaz's work: the short-story collections *Drown* and *This Is How You Lose Her*; the MFA thesis "Negocios"; *Islandborn*, a children's book; the interviews, the essays, and the improvisations; and above all his novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. The resulting findings do not add up to a tidy, neat narrative. Rather, this book tries to put carne on the huesos of my claim—it unpacks a fictional multimundo in which there is a continual dialogue among complex characters, settings, myths, and strategies that continually appear, evaporate, morph, and haunt. And in the process it asks questions embedded in the works and apropos of our moment: Why are Díaz's historias mainly stories of the failure of his male characters' efforts to overcome their misogyny and the violence of the coloniality of gender on the bodies and souls of his female characters? Why do both his female and male characters suffer from "repetitive trauma" and rape?

Like the Chilean Roberto Bolaño's "post-boom" stories and novels about the global abyss of his imagined Santa Teresa, Mexico, in *The Savage Detectives* and *2666*, Díaz's works engage in fictional world making by focusing on how the loser always yields—from a literary point of view—more, far more, than a winner.[21] I am thus interested here in why so many of Díaz's characters are "doomed" and tangled up in the failure of transcending the history of coloniality and the transgenerational history of rape of the New World, or what Díaz ingeniously called the "fukú americanus" in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Even as Díaz's characters are failing, they are affected by a utopian, pas-

sionate counternarrative, what he dubs a "zafa." One of the invigorating effects of Díaz's historias of failure concerns their literary forms and the characters' everyday poetic rhythms. His prose has a powerful vitality, even when treating apocalyptic end-of-the-world themes.

In short, my book responds to the question posed by its title, *Junot Díaz: On the Half-Life of Love*. Who is Junot Díaz, and what is this "half-life of love" that permeates his fiction, most centrally in his short story "The Cheater's Guide to Love"? Do his characters' passions triumph over experience? Are Yunior de Las Casas and Oscar de León wise when they fall in love? Or when they experience the radioactive-like decay of heartbreak? Díaz suggests that love is itself not only a specific kind of relationship between human subjects and objects of desire but also a means of decolonial knowledge production.[22] Do Díaz's male and female characters find out who they are by loving? The book addresses the first part of the titular question with a straightforward answer: Díaz is still one of the leading American writers of his generation, capable of reaching both a global mainstream audience and more professionalized readers and writers like President Obama. The answer to the second part of the question—what Díaz's sense of (decolonial) love is and why the half-life of love lasts forever—is less straightforward, less portable, and more arabesque.

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My debts, stretching back over a ten-year period, are too numerous to acknowledge fully.

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my understanding of the Trujillato and to the anarchy of US empire; not only would this have been a different book without their help and advice, but the research and preparation would have been much less interesting.

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Parts of this book evolved in my undergraduate and graduate seminars at Stanford University. I have learned a tremendous amount by co-teaching with Patricia Valderrama, Alexis Marie Pearce, Chiara Giovanni, Ellis Schriefer, and Joseph Wager.

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Portions of the present text have appeared earlier in the following journals and books: "Conjectures on 'Americanity' and Junot Díaz's 'Fukú Americanus' in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*," *Global South*, 5, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 120–36; "Conjecturas sobre amor descolonial, transamericanidad y el 'Fukú Americanus' de Junot Díaz," *Revista Casa de las Américas* 297 (octubre deciembre 2014), 85–91; and "Junot Díaz's Search for Decolonial Aesthetics and Love," in *Junot Díaz and the Decolonial Imagination*, ed. Monica Hanna, Jennifer Harford Vargas, and José David Saldívar (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 321–50.

Introduction

This book explores Junot Díaz's imaginative work and the diasporic and immigrant world he lives in, showing how his influences converged in his fiction and how his work—especially his Pulitzer Prize–winning novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*—radically changed the course of US Latinx literature and created a new way of viewing the decolonial world.

Díaz's fictional work is rich and diverse both in its inheritances from the author's past in Santo Domingo and New Jersey and in its reactions to the life of its own time. Although I have not written an intellectual biography, the opening chapter and each subsequent chapter of *Junot Díaz: On the Half-Life of Love* begins with a section about Díaz's life during the composition of his books. However, the main emphases are literary and critical.

In taking up such matters as Díaz's vexed relationship to the literary aesthetics of Whiteness that dominated his MFA experience in the English Department at Cornell University; his critiques of the colonialities of power, race, and gender in the cultures and societies of the Dominican Republic, the US, and the Américas; and his use of the science-fiction imaginary to explore the capitalist zombification of our planet, I show how Díaz's works stand in relation both to the literary currents of the early twenty-first century and to what we now call the transmodernist movement.

The author's personal perspective is closely connected with the social and the historical. Partly, perhaps, because US critics have not been interested in trans-American literary, cultural, and intellectual history, or in what I call trans-Americanity[1] writ large, these aspects of Díaz's imaginative work have not received very much attention. Díaz certainly raises especially difficult problems for the literary scholar; however, these difficulties arise because his trans-American inheritances from Santo Domingo and New Jersey are so rich,

diverse, and unique. Indeed, scholars such as Eric Paul Roorda, Lauren Derby, Raymundo González, Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel, and Dixa Ramírez have argued that the Dominican Republic (Díaz's birthplace) is a historical oddity in the hemisphere, for racial mixture has been the norm rather than exception. There, buccaneering prospered, and a society-wide plantation system did not exist as it did in Haiti, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Martinique, for slavery ended with national sovereignty in the early nineteenth century.[2] If, from 1492 to the present, Santo Domingo has been the "ground zero" of the New World's doom, the cursed "ghosts" of coloniality in Díaz's fiction—unleashed by Columbus—refuse to stay put in its port of entry. Díaz uses the Dominican Republic and the Dominican Afro-Latinx diaspora in the United States to redefine the notion of coloniality, and, in his novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, he uses coloniality to rearticulate the condition of coloniality in the broader context of what Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel calls the "intra-coloniality of diasporas."[3]

Through an interpretative literary commentary that restricts itself to the repertoire of meanings, or the aesthetics of reception, that the imagination can discover in detailed readings of Díaz's fictions—"Negocios," *Drown*, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, *This Is How You Lose Her*, *Islandborn*, and "Monstro"—Díaz's works, I suggest, expose the unattested deficiencies of hegemonic systems of thought.[4] By examining Díaz's decolonial turn and the negative aesthetics in his texts, I explore how the role of the imagination is crucial to the functioning of his fictions in allowing us the experience of a negative aesthetics: something not literally represented. Texts like Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*[5] compel readers to bridge the many gaps, blanks, and páginas en blanco created by the author's intentional suspension of relations between meaningful segments of the work. Moreover, these textual gaps, black holes, and silences allow Díaz, as I argue in chapter 4, to call attention to the history of erased genocides, traumas, and tortures in the Dominican Republic, the Caribbean, and the New World Américas in his novel.

As I write this, I remember vividly the evening at the University of California, in the Berkeley Dwinelle Hall auditorium in April 2003, when I first met the then thirty-five-year-old Junot Díaz, who was sharing the podium as a keynote speaker along with his longtime friend and fellow writer Edwidge Danticat and me at a small conference on the Hispanic and Francophone Caribbean diaspora organized by some graduate students in the departments of comparative literature and history. At the event, Danticat spoke passionately about the Dominican Republic's war on Haitian immigrants and the deportations that had been happening on the border that separates the Dominican Republic from Haiti since the early 1990s on the island of Hispaniola. And Díaz, true to form,

read an extraordinary historia about a young Dominican American romantic bungler who had committed the sin of making his novia unhappy.

During the Q&A, Díaz and Danticat eviscerated anti-Black and anti-Haitian politics, criticized past Dominican presidents for ordering the deportations of Haitians and Haitian Dominicans, and spoke of the lasting legacy of Rafael Molina Trujillo's genocidal massacres of thousands of Haitian immigrants along the border.[6]

The next day, I went to Moe's Books on Telegraph Avenue, a favorite haunt of mine at the time, and bought every Danticat title and every present and back issue of the *New Yorker* I could find featuring Díaz's short stories (I already owned and had taught Díaz's *Drown* in my Latinx literature classes), and I have been bingeing on their historias ever since. I was especially impressed by their carefully rendered Hispaniola historias of apocalyptic doom and hope. Díaz, it seemed to me, was attempting to look at the US Latinx cultural milieu with profoundly unsettled and unsettling eyes. He was captivating readers not only with his mesmerizing prose but also with his mind. He was designing the imaginary (or constructed) worlds in his fiction by drawing upon and subverting the political, aesthetic, and generic power of role-playing games, films, comics, video games, and literary texts to build his fiction. And his goal as a writer, it occurred to me, was to create imaginary (alternative) multimundos: ultimately, all his efforts to date serve that higher purpose.

This book endeavors to chart Díaz's improbable literary career as he fights off the trauma of his childhood rape, his writer's block, the trauma of September 11, 2001, and the farragoes of nonsense and miserable botches in the text's drafts to emerge with what many see as the best novel written at the start of the twenty-first century, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.[7] With this book I hope to cast new light on what Díaz's fiction is and to show how it was that he came to invent it.

In my opinion, Díaz's novel radically revamps our understanding of US Latinx literary culture. US Latinx literature, as Ilan Stavans suggests in his monumental *Norton Anthology of Latino Literature*, is a hemisphere of great dreams, vast immigrant mirages, and shattering odysseys and curses, with "double attachments to place, language, and to identity."[8] Díaz begins his novel by taking us back to the first colonial usurper, who he simply calls throughout the text the "Admiral." Almirante Colón, of course, was the first writer of lo real maravilloso americano because when he crossed the Atlantic in 1492, he did not so much discover Hispaniola (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic) and the New World Américas as invent them, exaggerating their marvels and wonders, giving Europeanized names to everything he saw, and classifying, like a future

mad Linnaeus, races, flora, and fauna. Although the almirante's journals were fanciful leaps of the imagination, he ended up, as Díaz's Dominican American narrator, Yunior de Las Casas, opines, "miserable and syphilitic, hearing (dique) divine voices." Thus envisaged, although the almirante's journals were full of marvels, his true tale of the New World was a bitter historia of failure and doom, opening the "nightmare door that cracked open" the processes of Americanity, or what Díaz refers to throughout the novel as the "fukú americanus," the monumental curse and the "Doom of the New World."[9] Four hundred and seventy-five years after Almirante Colón's ethnographic-like realist tale of the New World's failure, the Colombian Nobel Prize–winning writer Gabriel García Márquez offered his own discovery tale of solitude and fukú-like curses in *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*) by narrating how after leading twenty-one unsuccessful civil wars against Macondo's conservative regime, the novel's revolutionary colonel Aureliano Buendía sees his grandiose vision of creating a unified federation of emancipated American states—from the Patagonia to Alaska—come to nothing, and the Colonel dies miserably, declaring that he who spends his life fighting ends up "jodido" (fucked).

For Junot Díaz, the United States of America, Latin America, and the Caribbean island of Hispaniola had precise dates of birth with Almirante Colón's first landfall on October 12, 1492, and most of the republics of the Américas also shared birthdays when they achieved revolutionary emancipation from the British, Dutch, French, and Spanish colonial rule some centuries later. Inevitably, the history of Caribbean Hispaniola, Latin America, and the United States has followed, for Díaz, the rhythms and logic of European coloniality. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Díaz expertly surveys this whole erratic and doomed history, and he memorializes his hero's native island by setting Oscar de León's brief and tragic life's ending on the land that the almirante and he loved best. At the end of his life, Díaz's Oscar de León calls Santo Domingo "the Ground Zero of the New World."[10]

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao is a sweeping family narrative about the violent sins and curses that haunt the literary Caribbean, Hispaniola, the continent, and its African diasporic children through centuries after centuries—conquest, murder, rape, expropriation, dictatorship, the cultures of US imperial invasion (the fukú americanus)—countered by the redemptive quest (or counterspell zafa) for legitimacy and the politics of identity and the struggle for emancipation, inevitably involving a raising of consciousness, further discrimination from within and without for "the most oppressed of the oppressed," and a new round of doom and despair. I assert that US Latinx América can be said to exist in large part because novels like Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar*

Wao give rise to and unify, in the most material way imaginable, that historically constructed, riven, fragmented space we call América. Indeed, novels like Díaz's confirm the existence of the fukú americanus as the legacy of coloniality and the sepulchral hand of global capital.

Díaz wrote *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* over an eleven-year period: first in seclusion on a Guggenheim Fellowship in Mexico City; later in Syracuse and Harlem, New York; and still later in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The repertoire of Díaz's text, as I will elaborate in chapter 4, not only is derived from a great number of different systems but is also presented in such density that first-time readers find themselves being constantly disoriented. The problem lies not so much in the unfamiliarity of the novel's allusive elements, for these in themselves are not difficult to identify—Jack Kirby and Stan Lee's *The Fantastic Four*, J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*, Homer's and Derek Walcott's *Odyssey* and *Omeros*, Aimé Césaire and Édouard Glissant's Greater Antillean poetics, Sandra Cisneros's and Toni Morrison's novels—but in the intermingling and the sheer mass (some 150 allusions to sci-fi books, characters, films, and TV series) that cause the repertoire to become, depending on your reaction, noise or symphony. As Díaz suggests about his work's repertoire, "I tried to stuff as many books as I could into *Oscar Wao*. I mean, shit, even the title refers to Oscar Wilde and 'The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber' simultaneously."[11] Further, each chapter of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* stretches backward and forward in time from the dictator Trujillo's 1930s to Reagan's dark 1980s and follows the arcs of Díaz's various immigrant characters' (mis)adventures and their inability to change the "hurricane winds of history." The novel is the history of these common winds of doom that surround the upper-class Cabrals in the Dominican Republic and the diasporic and working-class de Leóns in New Jersey. The dictator Trujillo imprisoned their family's patriarch, Dr. Abelard Cabral, over trumped-up charges, an act that sets off some of the curses on Oscar de León and his family. An initial chapter deals with the nerdy Oscar's misadventures in love as a child and adolescent in Paterson, New Jersey, and focuses on how his early life "goes down the tubes": as Yunior de las Casas explains, Oscar is a "pariguayo" with "no hustle" and "no G" who finds sanctuary in the "world of magic and mystery" to which he is transported as he reads "the more speculative genres."[12]

The next chapter of Díaz's novel shifts to Oscar's sister, Lola, who tells her own autohistoria, or feminist historia of coming to consciousness,[13] and offers its own possibilities of connection between the text's diverse elements. Like many Latinx feminist-of-color's autohistorias, Lola's chapter tells of her tussles with her Black Dominican immigrant mother, Belicia. One day she "punches"

her mother's hand away from her in a failed attempt to defeat Belicia's rage, which "fill[s] the House." This mother-daughter tussling foreshadows Lola's "coraje" and her suffering with a spiritualized "bruja feeling" that consumes all of the de León family. With a return to Yunior's narrative, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* moves back in time from Reagan's América oscuro (dark America) to the 1940s Dominican Republic's fukú americanus as we read of Oscar and Lola's Belicia's doomed affair with a monstrous character simply called "the Gangster," a sadistic man she loves "atomically" and who inflicts love's "heaviest radiations" on her. Like everyone else in this story, Yunior explains that Belicia "underestimated the shit she was in," for the Gangster was not only a married Dominicano but also married to the dictator Rafael Trujillo's sister, known as La Fea—"una mujer bien cruel . . . who ate girls like Beli like they were pan de agua." "If this was Dickens,"—Yunior ironizes—"La Fea would also run an orphanage."[14] With the teenage Belicia's near-fatal beating in the Dominican Republic's sugarcane fields in 1961 on orders from La Fea, and her eventual diasporic escape to the sanctuary of Paterson, New Jersey, the trans-American novel and science-fiction tale turns again from a near Dickens-like British realism to the form of the bildungsroman as Yunior, the Flaubertian sentimental hero, continues to fill in the text's numerous gaps, páginas en blanco, and literal blanks between the text's different elements and Oscar's misadventures in love, sentimental education, and attempted suicide at Rutgers University.

One Halloween, the nearly three-hundred-pound Rutgers freshman Oscar de León makes "a mistake" and dresses up like the British science-fiction television character Dr. Who, a time lord and time-traveling humanoid alien. (As Yunior remembers crudely, "[I] couldn't believe how much he looked like that fat homo Oscar Wilde.") One of their Dominicano undergraduate friends, Melvin, fully corrupts Oscar's new name by asking, "Oscar Wao, quien es Oscar Wao?"[15] Yunior's historia takes another historical turn with the story of the failed attempts of Oscar's grandfather, Dr. Abelard Cabral, to save his daughters and wife from rape and murder at the hands of the "pig-eyed" dictator Rafael Molina Trujillo in the 1940s Dominican Republic, a place of "implacable ruthless brutality" that was run by the dictator "like it was a Marine boot camp."[16] The final chapters of Díaz's novel return from the modes of the bildungsroman and the historical novel to complete the doomed ending of Oscar and Yunior's misadventures in love. Through this repertoire and sequence, linking the de Léon family's dark "fukú americanus" to the doomish savagery brought about by the Trujillo regime, the narrative attempts to show that Oscar's postcontemporary misadventures in love had, if not their beginnings, at least their type in Abelard's doomed attempt to protect his familia from Trujillo's potent "mixture

of violence, intimidation, massacre, rape, co-optation and terror"[17] and in the afterlife of Beli's tragic affair with the Gangster, a brother-in-law of the dictator. A final element in the text's repertoire returns readers to speculative, heroic fantasy by way of Yunior de Las Casas, who offers a contrapuntal remedy to the dark fukú or doom of the Américas by telling of Oscar's police beating and murder in a sugarcane field in the Dominican Republic.

The story of how Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and its title came to be is in itself an improbable historia. Eleven years had passed after the publication of his first book, *Drown*. After winning a Guggenheim award in 1999, Díaz spent a year living in Mexico City writing a failed "Akira-like" science-fiction novel in progress, constructing what was to become his Pulitzer Prize–winning novel, and trying to improve his Spanish. Díaz lived next door to his longtime Guatemalan American friend Francisco Goldman, a novelist and journalist. One night after carousing the streets of Mexico City with Goldman, Díaz picked up a copy of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and someone said Oscar Wilde's name in a thick Spanish accent—a "quick joke," Díaz notes—but the incredible name Oscar Wao took on life. In his Mexico City epiphany, Díaz had a "vision of a poor, doomed ghetto nerd . . . dashing the first part [of the novel] out in a couple of weeks."[18] The novel went on to win the Pulitzer Prize and nab almost every other prize available. With Díaz now included, one can count on two hands the number of first-time novelists who have won a Pulitzer Prize, not to mention that he is only the second Latinx writer to win one.[19]

The novel's Pulitzer Prize helped Díaz skyrocket into the broader public consciousness, giving US Latinx fiction an unprecedented visibility in the Américas and across the planet, and altering the landscapes of American literature and culture.[20] My reading and writing about *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* has certainly gotten me to rethink my approach to literature, prompting me to better understand the DNA of literary fiction through Díaz's novel: how it works, why it matters, why readers from all over the planet read and identify with Díaz's imaginative texts, and what the profound connection between Díaz's characters and imaginative transference is all about. As I've traveled all over the world lecturing on Díaz's work—to La Habana, Cuba; Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic; San Juan, Puerto Rico; Berlin, Germany; Stockholm and Uppsala, Sweden; as well as through many college and university towns across the United States, including Díaz's alma maters Rutgers and Cornell—I've always had my copies of Díaz's novel and creolized short stories nearby. It's clear that Díaz has been searching for new ways of conveying the plural and contradictory (speculative) realities of what the almirante had

Figure I.1 Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, panorama. Wikipedia Commons.

"cracked open" in 1492, which is why *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*—like Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Roberto Bolaño's *2666*, and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*—is a decolonial narrative with world-systemic, global perspectives. In other words, the works I study by Díaz in this book are exemplary of the postcontemporary worlding of US Latinx literature—texts that contribute to the consolidation of both our world and US Latinx/Latin America as their chamber of resonance.[21]

Junot Díaz's Life, or, Becoming Junot Díaz: Santo Domingo, New Jersey

Every life tells a story, and this is what we know about Díaz's. He was born in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, on December 31, 1968, and was raised there until he was six years old (see figure I.1). His father, Rafael, was from Baitoa, some seventy-five miles from La Capital, where Dominicanos are proud of their cattle, their merengue, and their national parks, and where Rafael learned the value systems of a stern patriarchy, militarism, and love of bulls. In Santiago, Rafael became a cobbler and later moved to Santo Domingo, where he joined the notorious military police of the post-but-pro-Trujillo regime of President Joaquin Balaguer. Díaz's mother, Virtudes, was originally from Estebanía (near Azua) and migrated to La Capital, where she worked long hours in a chocolate factory. Rafael and Virtudes met in Villa Juana in the 1950s, married, and had a daughter, Marisabela, and a son, Rafael, after which Junot and his younger siblings, Maritza and Paul, were born. (The youngest brother, Paul, would be born in New Jersey.) Díaz recalls that "he loved his teachers" in the Santo Domingo neighborhood schools and that his early schooling (in Spanish) was often "chaotic and fun."[22] The Díaz family lived in various working-class sections of Santo Domingo and eventually settled in Villa Juana, where they lived in a small wooden house without plumbing on 53 Calle Sumner Wells—also known as Calle 21.

As it stands today, the house on Calle Sumner Wells is not, properly speaking, the original wooden house (without plumbing) where Díaz was raised but instead the total reconstruction of the dwelling Díaz helped pay for in 2007 (fig-

Figure I.2 53 Calle Sumner Wells, Villa Juana, Santo Domingo. Photograph by the author.

ure I.2). The stark effect of the reconstructed, hyperurban new house, with its barbed-wire gates and iron-barred windows, is the mark of modern Santo Domingo, where some of Díaz's relatives reside. Symbolically, the house on 53 Calle Sumner Wells anchors itself in Villa Juana, where it is surrounded by colmados (general barrio stores); bars; vast high-rise working-class housing projects; and the Caribbean sonics of the masses speaking to one another in the kinetic vernaculars of La Capital. As Diáz recalls, it is the very "polyrhythms of Santo Domingo in which I grew up all my life which were in people's body language, in the music they listened to and in the words they spoke. These rhythms infiltrated all my writing. I think a really good sentence, a really good piece of writing a certain attention should be paid to its rhythm."[23]

Here on Calle Sumner Wells, Junot Díaz and his siblings grew up without their father, who had emigrated to the United States. Díaz had met his father only a few times during his infrequent visits to the island. But Rafael, Díaz says, "was a total pro-Trujillo fanatic."[24] He loved having his picture taken in his military attire (like his hero Trujillo), but for Díaz his father's military uniform would become an emblem of "terror" for him. For instance, one of Díaz's "scar-

iest" and traumatic moments he experienced as a young boy in Santo Domingo was when his father Rafael "jokingly" locked him into one of the prison cells in the "cuartel" where he worked. These were the very "same cells," Díaz recalls, "where the Trujillo regime used to torture its victims." It was not "a real swell dad-son moment" for the young Díaz.[25] Although Díaz does not like to go into details about his father's fascist-like military ethic, he has noted in his interviews how his father's harsh disciplinary code of conduct and influence shaped his and his siblings' diasporic lives in the United States. All of his brothers, for example, signed up for the US military, although his older brother was rejected for medical reasons. His sister married a US army soldier, and they spent the 1980s together on a tank base in Germany.[26]

American journalists and literary scholars have familiarized themselves with Díaz's immigrant life in New Jersey, Nueva York, and Cambridge, Massachusetts, but few have explored in any depth Díaz's world in Santo Domingo, where he was born and spent the first six years of his life. I have embarked on this sketch of Díaz's early life in Santo Domingo, and Parlin, New Jersey, in the immediate aftermath of Edwidge Danticat and Díaz's critique of the Dominican Republic's continuing deportation of Haitian "illegal aliens."

Before I traveled to Santo Domingo, I was warned by Díaz and several Dominican American friends not to announce too publicly that I was writing a book on him because the hard-core nationalists and right-wing fanatics of La Capital were incensed by his public criticism of their government's immigration policy. As Díaz wrote to me, "honestly right now the attacks from the right and the nationalist are insane. I'd be careful in the DR about being too public about what you're doing."[27] As I arrived in Santo Domingo, I was told by some of his more activist and vocal supporters, especially the award-winning screenplay writer Miguel Yarrul and the human-rights activist and curator Luisa de Peña, that although they love all of Díaz's books and that his Pulitzer and MacArthur honors have made them feel immensely proud as Dominicans, they were nevertheless deeply disappointed, saddened, and heartbroken by his very public criticism of their country's government plan to deport the thousands of Haitians living in the country without papers. Even in the midst of what we might call *Junotpalooza* in Santo Domingo—partying with people like there's no tomorrow—the intellectuals from La Capital I met were not shy about presenting their local analytical and critical views of Díaz's life, work, and career in the United States. The primary criticism of Díaz was twofold: first, he had not attempted to meet with local activists such as themselves, who had long been openly opposed to their government's policies on Haitian migrants; and second, Díaz had not been in Santo Domingo to see for himself what was actu-

ally happening on the ground. However, as newspapers such as the *Miami Herald* and the *Guardian* reported, Díaz had in fact been in La Capital and had witnessed for himself the events of the country's anti-Haitian racism in June 2015.

At a Miami press conference on June 24, 2015, Díaz and Danticat participated in a panel calling for protests against the deportations of Black Haitian migrants living in the Dominican Republic. Together with more than 150 US-based activists and Latinx community members, they asked for more political pressure to strip power from the country's government and from corporations benefiting, they argued, from a racist policy that targeted Black Haitians. Having just returned from Santo Domingo that week, Díaz, according to the *Miami Herald*, reported that "there's a state of terror" in La Capital, referring to the country's humanitarian crisis: the Dominican government's plan to deport hundreds of thousands of Dominicans of Haitian descent and undocumented immigrants from Haiti. "If you're not concerned you should be," said Danticat, "especially when we live in a town where most of us came from somewhere else. . . . A lot of people are in hiding and are afraid to go out since the deadline passed."[28]

Maria Rodriguez, executive director of the Florida Immigrant Coalition, led the Miami panel discussion and called the actions of the Dominican Republic's government a "globalized anti-black expression." The goal of the panel was not to call for a boycott of the Dominican Republic but rather to shed light on the quarter-century-long clash between Haitians and Dominicans on the island of Hispaniola. According to the *Herald*, another panelist, Edilberto Roman, a professor of law at Florida International University, noted that the tensions between the two countries had escalated when the Dominican government "re-interpreted" its constitution and announced that Haitians and Dominicans with Haitian blood who came and worked after 1929 would be denied citizenship. "What the court in the Dominican Republic did in 2013, was that it said the [Haitian] people there were 'in transit' since 1929," Roman explained. "These are repeated efforts where the Dominican Republic has tried to alienate its people."[29]

Díaz added that "in Santo Domingo, citizenship is a commodity," for "even under the best circumstances, folks who are rural and poor would be incredibly hard-pressed to meet any of the criteria [for citizenship]."[30] Although the Dominican Republic and Haiti share the island of Hispaniola, the countries have long had an uneasy borderlands relationship, particularly regarding migrant workers. According to the *Guardian*, an estimated 500,000 Haitian stateless migrants presently live in the Dominican Republic, but Dominican government officials said that just 10,000 had provided the documents required by an immi-

gration registration program aimed at regulating the flow of migrants across its border. The Dominican government claimed it would deport the noncitizens who did not submit applications to establish legal residency before a June 17, 2015, deadline. At the Miami press conference, Díaz and Danticat, like many advocates for migratory human rights from all over the world, decried this registration program because it was discriminatory.

Whereas Díaz characterized what he found in the Dominican Republic's capital of Santo Domingo as "a state of terror" just as the June 2015 deadline passed, with the government's critics (including Díaz himself) receiving death threats and taking their families into hiding, Danticat worried about images of women and young children who had nowhere to go after being deported to Haiti. Together, they linked the Dominican Republic's announced deportations to the violence against African Americans in the United States, including the mass shooting of nine people in June 2015 at a South Carolina church, as well as migrant surges at Mexico's US border, across the Mediterranean into Europe, and in Asia. At fault, Díaz noted, is an indifference to racial and political tensions that exploit migrant workers and their countries' resources while stripping humanity from people "who are attempting to save themselves from the ruin inflicted by other people."[31] But the Dominican Republic's government is vulnerable to political pressure from travel boycotts and protests wherever Dominican officials make trade trips. "I've been working on targeting all the intellectual authors of this, not only identifying them but also boycotting and finding that way to interrupt their access to their easy privilege here in the United States," Díaz told the Associated Press. "There's a lot of us who are putting a lot of money in these corrupt human beings' pockets, and questions have to be raised at a personal level and at an organizational level."[32]

It was within this long-racialized history of tensions and mistrusts about Haitian migrants in the Dominican Republic that I was lucky enough in 2015 to travel to Santo Domingo to begin to measure for myself the incredible sum of the early biographical experiences and places that Díaz had accumulated in the first six years of his life in Santo Domingo, places and experiences that he later fully (re)imagined in his MFA thesis, "Negocios" (1995), and in his first book, *Drown* (1996). I not only visited Díaz's Santo Domingo childhood home on Calle Sumner Wells to get a feel for his nabe, but also talked with numerous writers, filmmakers, and human-rights activists about Díaz's imaginative work and social-justice activism. One of the highlights of my trip was seeing firsthand the energetic barrios of La Capital, or Santo Domingo, where many of Díaz's short stories and sections of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* are set, in all their mixtures of cultures and surreal polyrhythmic vibrancy. At the center

of the oldest of America's New World cities is Zona Colonial, where some 525 years later, one can still visit—as I did—some of the oldest surviving Catholic churches and European fortresses in the Américas, and the Colón monument.

In many of his early historias, as well as in sections of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, amid its geography of cobblestoned streets and colonial architecture, Díaz paints an intensely urban Caribbean city of ruins, home not only to its surviving colonial-era architecture but also to its vibrancy in our current decolonial era. Late in the novel, for instance, Díaz's Oscar writes in one of his notebooks that Santo Domingo's "tropical fecund smell" was for him "more evocative than any madeleine . . . like a whole new country was materializing atop the ruins of old ones."[33] In the Zona Colonial, for instance, one immediately sees the Catedral Primada de América, where the stones of the cathedral were first set in 1514 by Diego Columbus, Almirante Colón's son. One morning, I searched unsuccessfully for the ashes of both the almirante and his son—ashes rumored to have been laid in the chapel's crypt. Towering over the Catedral Primada is the Museo Alcazár, the citadel that was the chief home of Diego during the early sixteenth century. One can look through the Alcazár's Gothic-Mudejar windows, gaze out to the sea, and imagine Colón's perfect view of what was to become the Spanish Caribbean empire.

Near the Parque Colón is the iconic statue of Almirante Colón (figure I.3). This statue of the Genovese Colón, like the grandiose Columbus Lighthouse public monument that President Balaguer completed in 1992, as Dixa Ramírez suggests, is a "totem" that celebrates the beginnings of the world history of Colón's colonial modernity—its genealogy of a Hispanophilic past—and inaugurates the Hegelian-like world spirit of great men like Colón and his heirs monumentalized by Trujillo and Balaguer in the Dominican Republic, and figures like Kennedy and Reagan in the United States.[34] The park is one of the primary meeting places for Santo Domingo's local citizens, and it is vibrant with tourists and their guides, taxi drivers, shoeshine boys, and members of the national police. It is here, between the Colón park and Santo Domingo's iconic bridge on the Ozama River, where one of Díaz's best early short stories, "Aguantando," is haunted by the 1965 invasion of the Dominican Republic by the US military. As I elaborate in chapter 2, "Aguantando" is a series of anecdotes from when Díaz's primary narrator, an adolescent Yunior de Las Casas, was living in Santo Domingo. For the first six years of his life, Yunior lives in Santo Domingo without his father, who has migrated to Miami and then Nueva York to provide for the family. During these years Yunior's mother, Virta, tells her sons that their father had sent her letters telling her that he was coming to bring them back to the United States. After the first few letters, after Papi

Figure I.3 Christopher Columbus, Zona Colonial, Santo Domingo. Photograph by the author.

doesn't show up, they stop believing him. To provide for Rafa and Yunior, their mother works long hours at a chocolate factory; when she cannot afford to feed or clothe them, they stay at relatives' houses. During one period, shortly after receiving a letter from their father promising that he is coming home, Mami disappears for many weeks. She returns distraught, inconsolable, and distant from the boys, having relapsed into the deep depression and trauma she had suffered from her wounding when the US military had invaded the Dominican Republic, entering Santo Domingo via the Ozama River bridge.

Another major highlight of my Santo Domingo trip was visiting, alongside Dominicano screenwriter Miguel Yarrul, the Museo de la Resistencia on Calle Arzobispo Nouel, Número 210, in the Zona Colonial. The museo was inaugurated in May 2011, the fiftieth anniversary of the assassination of the dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina. Since its opening, the museo's mission has been to collect, organize, catalog, and exhibit the struggles of several gen-

erations of Dominicans subjected to Trujillo's reign of terror. And during my visit, the cofounder and director of the museum, Luisa de Peña, gave Yarrul and me a personal tour. "It's an exhibition," de Peña told me in English, "to commemorate the fallen in the struggle for democracy, but more than anything it is an educational institution devoted to educating new generations of citizens about the value of life and fundamental human rights."[35] We spent several hours poring over photographs, films, books, videos, and objects belonging to those who resisted not only the Trujillo dictatorship between 1930 and 1961 but also the three presidential terms of his political heir, Joaquín Balaguer: 1960–62, 1966–78, and 1986–96. De Peña proudly tells me that the Museo de la Resistencia was recently accepted as a member of the International Coalition of Historic Sites of Museums of Conscience, a network of museums around the world dedicated to covering topics such as genocide, human trafficking, state terrorism, and totalitarianism. Thus envisaged, the Museo de la Resistencia documents the disastrous effects of the leadership of Trujillo and Balaguer on the collective bodies and the psyches of Dominicans.

After showing me the bloodied shirts of one of Trujillo's assassins and an animated hologram reanimating the iconic Mirabal sisters—dissidents whose 1960 murders by Trujillo's military forces galvanized global opposition to him[36]—de Peña ended our tour by stopping at one of the museo's dioramas, a piece highlighting the Dominican resistance to the cultures of US imperialism. She then asked one of her staff assistants to escort me down into the museum's chilly basement. There they have re-created a model of one of Trujillo's torture centers, complete with a replica of one of Trujillo's horrific electric chairs, a small bulb on the armrest, a wire snaking from handle to socket.

I couldn't help but freeze at the sight of this electric chair (figure I.4). It reminded me of the horrific scenes in Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* set in Santo Domingo's torture chamber, where Díaz depicts Oscar de León's grandfather Dr. Abelard Cabral with eyes bulging, mouth flung open in terror as he endures routine torture. Both de Peña's Museo de la Resistencia and Díaz's celebrated novel bring into stark relief the thirty years of Trujillo's repressive rule, considered by historians among the bloodiest in the Américas. They are shocks to our conscience, reminding us of an all-too-human tendency to bury bloody chapters rather than measure traumatic legacies.

Before asking one of the museo's associate directors to show me the electric chair, Luisa de Peña stopped in front of a poster presentation that rescues the memory of her father, Luis, who was killed in 1967 as he plotted an insurrection against the dictatorial Balaguer. When de Peña tells me that our tour is over, she reminds me in her despedida that I am visiting the Museum of Resistance

Figure I.4 Electric chair, Museo de la Resistencia, Santo Domingo. Photograph by the author.

on September 3, 2015, the fiftieth anniversary of the US military invasion of the Dominican Republic. This call to "never forget" stays with me for the remainder of my time in Santo Domingo. The United States, as we know, has always imagined its national-identity politics to be somehow insulated from violent imperial interventions abroad: Díaz's imaginative work set in Santo Domingo, like de Peña's museo, argues that such a view of the United States is illusory. How can we ever forget the war with Mexico in 1848? With the former parts of the Spanish Empire in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines in 1898? The invasions of Haiti and the Dominican Republic in the twentieth century? In parts of chapter 3 I fold these questions into a reading of Díaz's debut short-story col-

lection, tracing how President Johnson's efforts to fan the anarchy of empire in the Dominican Republic helped engender the eruption of anarchy.

Junot Díaz, his mother, and his siblings emigrated from the Dominican Republic to Parlin, New Jersey, in December 1974. Joining Díaz's father, Rafael, who had moved to New Jersey years before, the diasporic family settled in a working-class New Jersey neighborhood. His mother cared for the five children and later worked on an assembly line; his father drove a forklift. Shifting worlds from an island in the global South to the empire of the global North was akin to living out a time-traveling science-fiction text, a cultural and linguistic shock of truly fantastical dimensions. As a young, poor Afro-Atlantic Dominican, Díaz found that his only access to the world outside his Parlin neighborhood was through film, literature, and television. While he was attending Madison Park Elementary School, his teachers thought something was wrong with him because he would not speak English, so they assigned him work with a speech therapist. At this time, he recalls, he became an inveterate reader of such popular sci-fi and heroic-fantasy writers as Ray Bradbury, Victor Appleton (author of the Tom Swift series), J. R. R. Tolkien, and later Stephen King, partly "to compensate for my lack of control of spoken English."[37] Aptly, he learned to read and write in English by poring over a novel of colonial revenge, the children's illustrated version of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Sign of the Four*. At eleven, Díaz started working his first job: a paper route in Parlin to pay for tickets to Hollywood movies, which became his "first narrative love."[38] From 1974 to 1989, Díaz and his family lived in Parlin's London Terrace apartments, an industrial red-orange-brick complex (figures I.5 and I.6). New Jersey's malls, crumbling streets, and monumental garbage heaps and toxic landfills were his first glimpse into the underside of América oscura. There, Díaz began writing fiction at thirteen when his older brother Rafa contracted leukemia in 1981: a disease likely caused by the carcinogenic dump near their London Terrace apartments. As Díaz revealed to Evelyn Ch'ien, he wrote his first short historias "to amuse Rafa during his hospital confinement" and to make sense of what had changed after his brother's slow recovery.[39] In my examination of Díaz's MFA thesis, "Negocios," in chapter 2, I analyze one of the work's central short stories ("London Terrace"), which is about social death and the toxic Global Landfill that surrounds the de Las Casas family.

Both Santo Domingo and Parlin—the American cities from the global South and global North in which Díaz grew up—shaped his worldview, his polyrhythmic Caribbean and New Jersey language, and his decolonial imagination. As an unpublished graduate student at Cornell, he conceived as early as the 1990s that his unfolding fictions would find form in an American cosmos—or in the

Figure I.5 London Terrace Apartments, Parlin, New Jersey. Screenshot. *New York Times Sunday Magazine*.

Figure I.6 Photographic collage of adolescent Junot Díaz with his mother and older brother. Screenshot. *New York Times Sunday Magazine*.

multimundo of New Jersey and the Dominican Republic. The majority of his fiction is set in the working-class suburbs of New Jersey, the island a haunting overlay; as I noted above, several of the stories from *Drown* and *This Is How You Lose Her*, as well as half of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, take place in the Dominican Republic. Furthermore, Díaz's language testifies to the polyrhythms and body languages of these dual locations; his imaginative literature is marked by a creolized vernacular: equal parts New Jersey and Santo Domingo urban slang that slides seamlessly between English and Spanish. As Ch'ien suggests in *Weird English*, "Díaz invests language with the power to influence political and social vision. He forcefully incorporates Spanish into his mainly English texts, showing concretely the linguistic violence that Spanish inflicts on English and vice versa. Instead of contorting English to fit Spanish, he demonstrates the inadequacy of English by substitution rather than metonymy or metaphor."[40]

After graduating from Cedar Ridge High School in Old Bridge, New Jersey, in 1987, Díaz attended Kean College in Union for a year before transferring to Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey in New Brunswick, where he completed his BA in English in 1992.[41] At Rutgers, Díaz read for the first time the two feminist writers of color who would inspire him to become a writer: Toni Morrison and Sandra Cisneros.

Years later, Díaz confessed to Morrison while interviewing her that when he read her novel *Song of Solomon* his first semester at Rutgers, "the axis of my world shifted and it has never returned."[42] And more recently, Díaz spoke about the poem "One Last Poem for Richard" by Sandra Cisneros, from which he takes his epigraph for *This Is How You Lose Her*. Discussing Cisneros's influence, Díaz raved about the revolutionary character of literature portraying intimacy between people of color:

> There was something really revolutionary about Sandra Cisneros's [works] when I encountered them as a young artist. . . . There's a part of me that just recognized that in a history like ours, in a country like ours which does everything to convince people of color that they're ugly and not valuable, to convince people of color that there's another body that is more aesthetically beautiful that you should desire more, I always felt like that poem for me that for two people of color to actually like each other in a country that tells you that you are a despised body is a fucking revolution. It's like a revolution, man, and I felt that that was very important because I grew up in that regime. I grew up in a world where all things white were more beautiful than all things black. I grew up in a world where you were being taught that there was a sexual economy where you

> weren't on the winning side, and I read that poem and I felt that that was important. For many of us in what we would call a post-colonial situation, intimacy has been a profoundly difficult challenge when you live in a world that tells you to think of yourself as somehow out of order already always.[43]

These celebrated women-of-color artists gave him a formative education not only in feminist praxis but also in the aesthetics of decolonization.

After Rutgers, Díaz went on to pursue an MFA in creative writing at Cornell, where he fashioned a beautiful thesis titled "Negocios" (1995), developed an activist consciousness, and began crafting a racialized (decolonial) aesthetic. "Negocios" is a gritty realist and postminimalist work comprising seven stories equally set in Santo Domingo and Parlin: the stories introduce his central character and principal narrator, Yunior de Las Casas, who has appeared in all of his subsequent work.[44] While writing his MFA thesis, Díaz published his first story, "Ysrael" (1995), in the now-defunct *Story* magazine. Two other short stories—"How to Date a Brown Girl (Black Girl, White Girl, or Halfie)" (1995) and "Drown" (1996)—were published in the *New Yorker* under the editorship of Bill Buford. These publications paved the way for Díaz's literary agent, Nicole Aragi, to place his first book, *Drown*, with Riverhead Books.

The interconnected stories in *Drown* center on the experiences of diasporic Dominicano and Dominicana characters and are relayed in powerful, creatively wrought Dominican Afro-Atlantic vernaculars. On the whole, *Drown* introduced some of Díaz's enduring preoccupations with Afro-Dominicanidad, hypermasculinity, and the ravages of internalized racism and transnational poverty on individuals, families, and communities. Published to critical acclaim, the book was a remarkable beginning for an Afro-Dominican writer in his mid-twenties. But, as Aragi recalls, when she first attempted to place Díaz's stories, "it was difficult to get anyone interested," for publishing is always "about matchmaking." "You have to find just one other person who gets it."[45] Indeed, since then, Díaz's publishers, award committees, and readers have "gotten it."

In 2007 Díaz published *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Five years later, he published a second short-story collection, *This Is How You Lose Her* (2012), as well as a part of a science-fiction novel then in progress titled "Monstro": an apocalyptic zombie story (what he might now dub a "critical, global dystopia"[46]) set in the Dominican Republic and Haiti. *This Is How You Lose Her* generated considerable buzz: the book garnered a National Book Award short-listing, and Díaz received a prestigious MacArthur Fellowship in that same year. With this book, Díaz again reworks the genre of the short-story cycle by dispersing

the narratological locus of enunciation among first-, second-, and third-person narratological perspectives, generating a complex and sustained critique of racism, White supremacy, machismo, and poverty. One of Díaz's goals, I argue, is to decolonize intimacy, affect, and love.

At a time when US Latinx politicians' responses to the Republican Party's (Trumpist) anti-immigrant, anti-Latinx, and extreme masculinist agenda were "tepid," as the National Institute of Latino Policy put it,[47] and at a time when Latinx speakers were nearly erased on national media, prevented from speaking out against Trumpist policies affecting the futures of our communities on health care, immigration, and the wall he proposed to build on the US-Mexico borderlands, Díaz provided timely critiques that rebuked the nation's White supremacy. He theorized in person and in print why so many White voters embraced the class fears and racial fantasies that Trump sowed to push a normalizing national brand and to "de-democratize" an already-ailing nation. As Díaz proclaimed, Latinx people need to connect with the fear and vulnerability that Trump's 2016 victory inflicted on our communities to resist the pull of utter despair and thus make recovery possible: "I grew up a poor immigrant of African descent from a parent who came over illegally—who was undocumented—and I have experienced precarity. I've always written about what it means to be in a country which depends on immigrant exploitation but demonizes and victimizes them all the same. I have been vaulted into middle-class comforts, but this time, this election, for many people has underscored their sense of how vulnerable they are. I do feel an urgency to write a little more, a little faster. All our voices, all our interventions are sorely needed."[48] Facing the abyss of Republican Party Trumpolandia, Díaz turned his literary writing into a doctrine of critiquing the tumultuous normalization of our times. He made a point to call allies into action.

Not since the publication of the Latin American writer Roberto Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives* has there been such a considerable critical reaction of a Hemispheric American author in the US, Latin America, and Europe. In a conversation with Díaz in *Document* magazine, Toni Morrison described her first reading of Díaz's work as a life-affirming, rhapsodic experience:

> I believe I read your short stories first. What attracted me to those stories or whatever I read—I have short-term memory loss, you have to understand, I'm 86, so I get to forget things—was how startled I was by the language. It was so real and intelligent and wild. There was the wildness as well as some deep intelligence, and I didn't think the combination of the two was possible in recent literature. Yours struck quite immedi-

ately and it wasn't just the combination of words from Santo Domingo or curse words or grammatical [uniqueness]. It was provocative but there was something so human in the nostalgia and in the knowing of human beings. I don't know anybody who writes like that, the way you do, but it's very fetching, and I look forward to more, and more, and more.[49]

Morrison suggests that through Díaz's "deeply intelligent" and "wild" literary language readers can rediscover what it means to be in the presence of the "knowing" of human beings. In other words, Díaz's imaginative work, as Morrison suggests, does not strip humanity of its futurities and its utopian possibilities, nor does it negate the ethical imperatives of human survivance.

Tracing the becoming of Junot Díaz as writer and activist intellectual, the chapters in this book take us from his activist years as a graduate student at Cornell in the 1990s to his rapid success with the publications of *Drown*, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, and *This Is How You Lose Her*, as well as the dawn of his current activism.[50]

Díaz has not only been an outspoken critic of White supremacy in our culture and institutions of higher education, but also, more recently, he has taken on Dominican Republic governmental officials who have orchestrated the "state of terror" and fear in the Dominican Republic in which most Haitian residents now live. From the *Miami Herald* to the *Guardian* and the *Nation*, Díaz has been featured as one of our country's most outspoken critics of the anti-Haitian "pogrom" in his home island of the Dominican Republic. "The last time something like this happened," Díaz said, "was Nazi Germany, and yet people are like, shrugging about it."[51] In addition to appearing on panel discussions to criticize the anti-Haitian policies in the Dominican Republic, Danticat and Díaz have met with US senators, representatives, and their staffs to urge Congress to condemn the Dominican Republic's taking away the nationality and citizenship of Dominicans of Haitian descent.

However, Díaz's activism has come with a price. A cultural hero of the Dominican Republic, Díaz had been granted the Order of Merit by Eduardo Selman, the general consul of the Dominican Republic in New York, for his "talent, creativity, and professional trajectory of our most accomplished Dominicans, who symbolize the most genuine values and principles of la dominicanidad" or Dominican-ness.[52] But Selman audaciously took back the Order of Merit from Díaz after the government saw his condemnations as anti-Dominicano. One wonders: will Selman revoke Díaz's citizenship too?

When I was in Santo Domingo, I heard and felt how Díaz was passionately detested by the Dominican Republic's hard-core nationalists and right-wing

zealots because of his vocal insistence that rising White supremacy and its related xenophobias are largely driven by the nation's elites. Selman's position as general consul of the Dominican Republic in New York is mainly to conduct damage control against the planetary condemnation of his country's policies against Dominicans of Haitian descent, but going after the Dominican American writer Díaz and stripping him of his Order of Merit surely backfired by drawing even more global attention to the "civil genocide" of Dominicans of Haitian descent in the Dominican Republic.

Sometimes losing an award isn't such a bad thing.[53]

Overview and Form of This Book

Divided as it is into three parts and five chapters, this book is more traditional and symmetrical than any other work I have written. To discuss the improbable rise of Díaz's literary career and his decolonial imagination in the chapters that follow, I have provided critical and decolonial, literary readings of his MFA thesis, "Negocios"; his first book, *Drown*; *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*; and *This Is How You Lose Her*. Chapter 1 provides a genealogy of Díaz's activism and his lifelong wrestling with J. R. R. Tolkien's states of fantasy and world building. Part I is then divided into two overlapping chapters. Chapter 2 deals with some of the key stories that Díaz wrote in Ithaca, New York, as an MFA student in the English Department at Cornell: "Aurora," "Negocios," and "London Terrace." These spare short stories showcase Díaz's central consciousness, Yunior de Las Casas, attempting to make sense of his diasporic adolescence, diasporic belonging, and survival in Parlin's multimundo of London Terrace. Their dystopian tone should not disguise their practical purposes. For the teenaged Yunior, "belonging" in "Aurora," "Negocios," and "London Terrace" is largely articulated with appeals to his different "translocal" solidarities: feelings born of estrangement, truancy, and diasporic rootings in Central New Jersey. In chapter 3 I track the transformation of Díaz's MFA thesis into his first book, *Drown*, by focusing on seven central stories: "Ysrael," "Fiesta, 1980," "Aguantando," "Drown," "Boyfriend," "No Face," and "How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie."

In my novella-length chapter 4, "Becoming Oscar Wao," I grapple with Díaz's eleven-year battle that produced *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. By following Díaz's life in Mexico City, Syracuse, and Cambridge, where he first wrote a long short story titled "The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao," which was published in the *New Yorker*, I attempt to unpack how Díaz's novel, building on the version of the text that appeared in magazine, used blanks, gaps, and

páginas en blanco to create a productive oscillation between determinacy and indeterminacy. Díaz's blanks are not merely gaps or omissions. Rather, following the literary-reception works by Wolfgang Iser and Winfried Fluck, I suggest that they are carefully crafted interruptions of relations—and relations of interruption—that enjoin readers to provide links between the novel's discontinuities. His blanks and páginas en blanco compel us to set up relations between the text and our own imaginary constructs. Díaz's textual "negativity"—his literal blanks and páginas en blanco—generate his aesthetic experience by enticing his readers to articulate something that is absent in the text.[54] To supply, in other words, their own light in the dark.

Finally, I turn to Díaz's theory of the fukú americanus and how it originated in colonial modernity with Almirante Colón and how it was then carried into the present by homegrown figures such as Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina and Ronald Reagan. To chart the full dimensions of Díaz's narratological compass in the global South, I analyze the attempt of the sociologists Immanuel Wallerstein and Aníbal Quijano to recover the complexity of what they call "Americanity." My aim here is to illustrate the complexity of Americanity's history and afterlife by analyzing it in relation to Díaz's decolonial theory of the fukú americanus. By introducing Fluck's "negative aesthetics" and Quijano and Wallerstein's "Americanity," I attempt to bring about a shift in the framework and the perspective as well as the object of analysis of Díaz's novel.

Bearing in mind Paula M. L. Moya's endorsement of Junot Díaz's "search for decolonial love" in his three books of fiction as well as her revelation that Díaz had informed her that his central consciousness Yunior's "ideas about women and the actions of these ideas [about them] always [left] him more alone, more thwarted, more disconnected from his community and himself,"[55] I make some claims in the fifth and final chapter of this book for the value of searching for decolonial aesthetics and love in his work. I begin first by analyzing a paratextual passage—a footnote[56]—from Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* in which Yunior de Las Casas critically reflects on his friend's spectacularly closeted reading of science-fiction and fantasy books and the effects that Oscar's reading in the closet has on Oscar's mother, on community friends, and on Yunior as the text's "faithful watcher."[57] The whole point of Yunior's observation and the allegory of Oscar's reading in the closet, I suggest, is for us to start thinking about what happens to US Latinx "immigrant-rising" barrio kids of color like Oscar, Yunior, and Lola when they read imaginative literature and, more importantly, what goes on in their complex inner lives. Whereas Yunior throughout the course of his narrating of Oscar's brief and wondrous life highlights and occasionally critiques Oscar's developing identity politics (who he

really is), he also champions Oscar's and his own changing politics of subjectivity (how they feel) as humans, their evolving dialectics of difference, and their ethics of convivencia and coexistence. I conclude by focusing on the last section on Yunior's forty-something fulsome search for decolonial love in "The Cheater's Guide to Love," the concluding story of *This Is How You Lose Her*. Here Díaz's Yunior de Las Casas, now a fully professionalized assistant professor of creative writing within what literary historian Mark McGurl has called the "program era" in US creative writing,[58] offers us much more than a lowbrow "guide" of his series of thwarted attempts to make human intimacy for himself and his series of lovers. I want to view both of Díaz's linked texts as extended exercises in dissident antihomophobic inquiry and racial hermeneutics that have had important effects on the author's provocative theories about the coloniality of power and gender, identity, sexuality, and their interrelations. Formally speaking, the role of the decolonial imagination is crucial to an understanding of Díaz's search for love. Díaz's negative aesthetics—his literature's potential to expose the hegemonic deficiencies of our world's accepted systems of thought and to provide readers with a new theory of justice—is crucial for an understanding of his fiction.

What do Díaz's writings offer in our (post)pandemic age? Why do his latest historias—"Monstro," a 2012 sci-fi text about the zombification of global capitalism, and *Islandborn*, a 2018 children's book—add to our thinking about diasporic history? What do they indicate about his future work? The conclusion and the coda trace answers to these questions by synthesizing arguments built up in previous chapters: Díaz's historically informed futurity might be key to recuperating communities and decolonizing, at long last, bodies, hearts, and almas. Díaz's poetics of indeterminacy and his signature use of negative aesthetics are brought to bear on a catastrophic ecological collapse that, in an objective and prophetic form, conveys the sense of our planet's doom. For its part, *Islandborn* develops the disjunctions between his Afro-Atlantic Dominican American characters' individual double consciousnesses and the role of the decolonial imagination in understanding Díaz's search for love.

Notes

PREFACE

1 Michiko Kakutani, "How Reading Nourished Obama during the White House Years," *New York Times*, January 16, 2017, A15.

2 Masks and Michel Foucault's poetics of "(ab)normalcy" figure prominently across Díaz's short stories, essays, and novel, from the very first story he published as a graduate student, "Ysrael," through *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, to his most recent autobiographical essays "The Silence" (2018) and "Old Masks, New Face," published in *Radcliff Magazine* in 2020. In *Drown*, for example, Díaz's characters use masks to hide pain, shame, personal identifications, and loss, whereas the actual mask in the story "Ysrael" screens his past and present traumas. In "The Silence," Díaz implies that figurative masks function as a deeply flawed coping mechanism for his own trauma: "The mask was strong. I kept that shit on for over twenty years." Díaz, "The Silence." Briefly, although the masks offer Díaz and his literary characters a short reprieve from their past pains, they come at the cost of forestalling the decolonial love that he and his characters long for. In his novel, Díaz's "the Man without a Face" who appears to Beli and her son Oscar is another representation of the writer's constellation of masked characters. "The Man without a Face" embodies the mask so thoroughly fixed that it leaves him without a face. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault outlines three kinds of control that "normalize" the human subject: hierarchy, observation (which normalizes judgment), and examination. All of these are functions of our modern disciplining systems used to correct deviant or abnormal behavior. The examinations of patients or of students combine hierarchical observation with normalizing judgment. They are prime examples of what Foucault calls "power/knowledge" because they combine into a unified whole: "the development of force and the establishment of truth." Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 184. Finally, in "Old Masks, New Face," Díaz analyzes his daily seven-month wearing of a medical mask in Cambridge and Boston to help him "slow the spread" and protect those around him in case he was unknowingly infected with the coronavirus. As in his previous literary work, the mask serves as a mirror of his and his fictional characters' dis-

alienation. Returning from a six-month sabbatical in Tokyo, Díaz grapples with his social-distancing alienation in the United States by going on long walks to combat his severe anxiety, often "blowing out" his shoes in the process of walking around his city streets. By also wearing a medical mask "a lot," at first "uncomfortable" until it became "routine," Díaz feels that his face "was cracking open" behind the mask. Just as he explained in "The Silence," Díaz here tells the reader that as a result of having grown up in a poor, immigrant Dominican family during "the Crack Kills *80s" and learning how to survive in his risky environment, he quickly learned how to turn his "face into a mask." In "Old Masks, New Face," he adds that he "learned quick" how to regulate this "facial affect"—weighing when to frown and smile, because everything "you did or didn't do with your face was open to misinterpretation and might put you in [mortal] danger." Díaz ends the essay by reflecting on what it means for him in our global pandemic to wear his medical mask "for large chunks" of his days and months. Although he imagines that "he had no face at all," he realizes that wearing the medical mask during our coronavirus pandemic helped him unveil his "real face," a "face that's free," his "decolonial face." For Díaz, the process of his mask veiling and unveiling is a progress in decolonial self-consciousness. It is a progress from his nonspecular or "irreal" identification to his "real," "free," and "decolonial "identification. In other words, the subject must free itself from the roles it mimics through the alienation imposed on it by the imagos of our culture and society. In "Old Masks, New Face," Díaz truly recognizes himself in his delusionary image and passes from ignorance to knowledge.

3 Through his agent, Nicole Aragi, Díaz said that he accepts responsibility for his behavior, although he denies ever forcibly kissing Zinzi Clemmons. See Alexandra Alter, Jonah Engel Bromwich, and Damien Cave, "The Writer Zinzi Clemmons Accuses Junot Díaz of Forcibly Kissing Her," *New York Times*, May 4, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/04/books/junot-diaz-accusations.html.

4 Alter, Engel Bromwich, and Cave, "The Writer Zinzi Clemmons Accuses Junot Díaz of Forcibly Kissing Her." For a rebuttal of the accusation of Díaz's subjecting an audience member at the University of Iowa to an enraged rant, see Mark Shanahan and Stephanie Ebbert, "Junot Díaz's Case May Be a #MeToo Turning Point," *Boston Globe*, June 30, 2018, accessed July 12, 2018, www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2018/06/30/junot-diaz-case-may-metoo-turning-point/3TMFseenE4G01eVsqbFSxM/story.html. Shanahan and Ebbert's investigative reporting suggested that this accusation against Díaz had "withered under scrutiny."

5 Subramanian, "In the Wake of His Damage."

6 See, for example, Figueroa-Vásquez, *Decolonizing Diasporas*, 79; and Moya, "Dismantling the Master's House," 233.

7 "Open Letter against Media Treatment of Junot Díaz."

8 "Open Letter against Media Treatment of Junot Díaz."

9 Two of the "letter to the editor" Latinx signatories, Linda Martín Alcoff, a professor of philosophy at CUNY and the Graduate Center, and Coco Fusco, a professor of creative writing at the University of Florida and renowned performance artist, then followed up their collective critiques of the media and expanded their support of

Díaz. Alcoff, in a *New York Times* op-ed piece, argued that "we must situate individual perpetrators within larger political systems" and further that "we need to go beyond easy binaries. . . . Sexist behavior, whether slight or severe, is never acceptable or excusable. Sexism in every form weakens liberatory movements, fractures solidarity and exacerbates the oppression of the oppressed." See Linda Martín Alcoff, "This Is Not Just about Junot Díaz," *New York Times*, May 2, 2018, accessed June 4, 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/05/16/opinion/junot-diaz-metoo.html. Fusco, in several Facebook responses to critics of her signing of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* letter to the editor (the open letter), called out some of the cultural and literary conversations surrounding Díaz. In particular, she found the short-story writer Machado's accusations of Díaz's bullying of her and subjecting her to an "enraged" rant at the University of Iowa to be wholly inappropriate. Fusco, Facebook, May 17, 2018, and June 18, 2018.

Because Latinx and women-of-color feminist theorizing is far from essentialist or homogeneous, the various letters to the editors and Facebook and Twitter responses by Díaz's Latinx feminist supporters were interpreted by a group of other women-of-color feminists as an attempt to silence Díaz's accusers and them. A younger (and less senior) group of women-of-color academics and public intellectuals rebutted the senior Latinx scholars by writing a letter to the editor published in *Medium* magazine. While they did not reject the possibility of reparative justice for Díaz, they argued that "survivor support should take precedence. We must work to build a culture in which all survivors feel that they will be protected by us even if their stories make us uncomfortable." "In Scholarly Debates on #MeToo Survivor Support Should Take Preference" explains that MIT, where Díaz is a professor of writing, had launched an investigation in May 2018 (as required by Title IX) into Díaz's behavior toward women students and staff, and on July 18, 2018, reported that "to date, MIT has not found or received information that would lead us to restrict [Díaz] in his role as a MIT faculty." Shanahan, "Junot Díaz Is Cleared in MIT Investigation." MIT's judgment in favor of Díaz was also echoed by a similar finding by the editors Deborah Chasman and Joshua Cohen of the *Boston Review*, when they announced in early June 2018 that they would retain Díaz as fiction editor after a careful "review of complaints" and interviews with "women of color in the world of literary fiction." Chasman and Cohen, "A Letter from Deborah Chasman and Joshua Cohen." Finally, for a critical and nuanced plea for analyzing Díaz's "complex reality" as a "survivor" of rape and as a culprit of aggressive behavior, see de León, "Reconciling Rage and Compassion."

10 Alcoff, "This Is Not Just about Junot Díaz."

11 During the five-month inquiry, the Pulitzer Board noted that the outside law firm William & Connolly had interviewed dozens of witnesses and analyzed hundreds of pages of documents, as well as audio recordings. The inquiry by the law firm "did not find evidence warranting removal" of Díaz from the Pulitzer Prize board's ranks. See Julia Jacobs, "Junot Díaz Remains on Pulitzer Prize Board after Review of Misconduct Allegations," *New York Times*, November 16, 2018, accessed December 1, 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/11/16/us/junot-diaz-pulitzer-board.html.

12 For a thorough recapitulation and investigation of the Junot Díaz case, see Deborah Chasman, "Why I Didn't Fire Junot Díaz," forthcoming. Chasman, the editor of the

Boston Review, not only explains in detail why she didn't fire Díaz from his position as the fiction editor of the *Boston Review* but also suggests that after her own investigation of the accusations made against Díaz by Zinzi Clemmons, Maria Carmen Machado, Monica Byrne, and others that if the case against Díaz "wasn't about the truth of the facts, then there was something about the emotional truth of women's experiences that seemed to matter more." Furthermore, Chasman writes that after own investigation at the *Boston Review*, she "found no evidence that [Díaz] had behaved improperly in his capacity as our fiction editor." Throughout her essay, Chasman asks readers why the mainstream media seemed "reluctant to investigate the allegations." Many magazines and almost every major newspaper in the United States published their own versions of the allegations against Díaz, all "with no new information or investigation"; Chasman criticizes the mainstream media for relying on "social media and the reporting by *Buzzfeed*." I am grateful to Chasman for sending me her forthcoming essay and for allowing me to quote from it.

13 Fluck, "Role of the Reader and the Changing Functions of Literature."

14 Díaz, email message to author, March 11, 2011.

15 Díaz, email message to author, March 11, 2011. Díaz's life matters, not only because President Obama somehow felt saved and enthralled by reading his pages during his presidency but also because of the work he has accomplished.

16 For Gumbrecht, the German word *Stimmung* can refer to the fine-tuning of musical instruments, but it also more commonly stands in for the word *mood*, indicating the atmosphere of a particular era or artistic work. Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung*, 10.

17 The theoretical concept of the decolonial turn has been formulated by the theorist Nelson Maldonado-Torres to refer to what he calls "the activity of decolonization, generally, and to decoloniality, more specifically." Decoloniality makes reference, Maldonado-Torres explains, "to the insurgent optionality of subjects and to the possibilities of decolonization in the *longue durée* of modern/colonial cultures and structures." Defined in this way, decoloniality is "intrinsically related to coloniality, which different from colonialism, refers to the specific matrix of power, being, and knowledge that became a central, if not constitutive, dimension of Western modernity, and its hegemonic civilization project." Maldonado-Torres, "Decolonial Turn," 111. See also Martínez-San Miguel, *Coloniality of Diasporas*.

18 The relationship between literary critic and imaginative writer is invariably a difficult one, and this is why, I believe, Díaz didn't comment on my interpretations of his work.

19 In fact, three years after the allegations against Díaz, his life remains, in Deborah Chasman's, words, "partially cut off from the literary world. Where he used to receive forty to fifty invitations for lectures and readings, the number has dropped to one or two, where it remains. . . . Since 2002, *The New York Times Book Review* has invited him to write two pieces." See Chasman's aforementioned forthcoming piece, "Why I Didn't Fire Junot Díaz."

20 My use and understanding of the term *Afro-Atlantic* is indebted to Figueroa-Vásquez's coining of the term in *Decolonizing Diasporas*: "The term 'Afro-Atlantic' rather than 'Black Atlantic' as a way to call attention to how 'Afro' as a prefix has been used

throughout the Caribbean and Latin America to signal or claim afrodescendencia, or Afro-descendance. . . . I add the prefix 'Afro' to the term 'Hispanic Atlantic' in order to more directly address the ways that Atlantic modernities are contingent upon forms of racialization and domination that are most often expressed through modes of anti-Blackness." Figueroa-Vásquez, *Decolonizing Diasporas*, 3–4.

21 As Roberto Bolaño's character Amando Salvatierra says in *The Savage Detectives*, "I saw our struggles and dreams all tangled up in the same failure, and that failure was called joy." Bolaño, *Savage Detectives*, 336.

22 In chapters 4 and 5, I tarry with Díaz's Fanonian decolonial knowledge of the self and other that is rendered possible by what he calls "sucio" (dirty, unclean) and "sucia" love. As we know, Frantz Fanon, whom Díaz loves to cite in his interviews (when he discusses his notions of decolonial love in his fictions), devoted some five pages to Hegel in *Black Skins, White Masks*. Like Hegel's bildungsroman *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Fanon's work thematizes what the Fanon scholar Irene L. Gendzier called "the long journey of coming to consciousness." Gendzier, *Frantz Fanon*, 22. Through Fanon's reading of Hegel in France, the dialectical tussle for recognition, reciprocity, and struggle became crucial for his thinking about the nature of dependence and the relevance of the other. The Hegelian tussle—the risking of life—that existed between two individuals facing each other and dependent on each other was recognition. But for Fanon, reciprocity needed to take center stage. As I argue in chapter 5, this Hegelian-Fanonian tussle for recognition and reciprocity between Díaz's sucio and sucia lovers is central to his literary-philosophical conceptualization of decolonial love. See Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*; and Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*. My thinking on (decolonial) love has also profited from Paul Kottman's *Love as Human Freedom*. For Kottman, the kind of knowledge of the self and the other that is made possible by the experience of love is the basis for what he calls human freedom. The philosophical underpinnings of Kottman's discourse on love are bolstered not only by Hegel but also Judith Butler. Last, but not least, I rely here on Andrew Cole's capacious reading of Hegel's dialectic of reciprocity. See Cole, *Birth of Theory*.

INTRODUCTION

1 See Quijano and Wallerstein, "Americanity as a Concept"; and Saldívar, *Trans-Americanity*.

2 See Roorda, Derby, and González, eds., *Dominican Republic Reader*; Ramírez, *Colonial Phantoms*; and Martínez-San Miguel, *Coloniality of Diasporas*. In her comparative work on Caribbean "archipelagic dislocations," Martínez-San Miguel suggests how buccaneering, pirating, and filibustering were central to Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora's *Infortunios de Alonso Ramírez* and Pere Labat's *Memoirs of Pere Labat*.

3 Martínez-San Miguel, *Coloniality of Diasporas*. Martínez-San Miguel tracks the intracolonial migrations in the Caribbean. Like her comparative work, Díaz's fiction grapples with ethno-racial gender definitions and linguistic identity as symbolic elements in a collective Afro-Atlantic Dominican identification.

4 In his discussion of Wolfgang Iser's *Act of Reading*, Winfried Fluck refers to the potential

of literature to "expose the limitations" and "deficiencies of accepted systems of thought." For Fluck, a text's "negative aesthetics" allows readers to conceive how the imagination functions in relation to history to create a vision that goes beyond the formulations of realism, modernism, and magical realism to articulate precisely what is absent in each. Fluck, "Role of the Reader and the Changing Functions of Literature," 256.

5 Díaz, *Oscar Wao*.

6 In October 1937, Trujillo ordered the massacre of all Haitians and the descendants of Haitians in the Dominican Republic. The event lasted several days and is often called in the Dominican Republic "El Corte" in reference to the machetes used to kill and maim the victims. Robert Crassweller, Trujillo's biographer, suggests that "the number of those who perished in these October hours will never be known with accuracy. . . . Estimates range from a low of 5,000 to a high of 25,000." Crassweller, *Trujillo*, 156. According to Haitian American novelist Edwidge Danticat, "October 2015 marks the 78th anniversary of what Haitians call the 1937 'Parsley' Massacre, where thousands of Haitians and their Dominican-born descendants were murdered in what the US Ambassador in Santo Domingo, R. Henry Norweb, described as 'a systematic campaign of extermination.'" According to Megan Jeanette Myers, the term *Parsley Massacre* refers to the test that Dominican soldiers forced upon Haitians and Haitian Dominicans: they would hold up some parsley and ask what it was. Because the Spanish word for parsley, *perejil*, "is difficult for Haitians to pronounce as Kreyol pronounces the letter 'r' differently," this test was used by Dominican soldiers to determine the Haitians' fate. "Those who could not roll the 'r' were killed." Moreover, Myers notes, Díaz thematizes the 1937 massacre in one of his paratextual footnotes (225n27) to *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Myers, "Dos rayanos-americanos Rewrite Hispaniola," *Confluencia: Revista Hispánica de Cultura y Literatura* 32, no. 1 (2016): 168–81.

On October 3, 2015, Border of Lights—a group of artists, activists, students, teachers, and parents—commemorated as well as brought light to the current situation with a virtual Twitter and Facebook chat. This was an opportunity to ask questions from activists and leaders of the Dominican Haitian diaspora as well as those who are working on the ground.

7 A group of American literary critics named Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, an ingenious take on the life of an overweight Dominican-American nerd, as the best novel of the twenty-first century to date. BBC Culture, the arts section of the international BBC site, polled "several dozen" US critics to find the greatest novels written so far this century, with 156 novels in all named by experts from papers including the *New York Times, Time, Newsday, Kirkus Reviews*, and *Booklist.* Díaz's first novel was top of the list for the most critics, said BBC.com, "with the Latin author's Pulitzer-winning creation Oscar Wao, a 'hardcore sci-fi and fantasy man desperate to get laid,' compared to Philip Roth's Portnoy and John Updike's Rabbit by one respondent. . . ." See Alison Flood, "*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* Declared 21st Century's Best Novel So Far," *Guardian*, January 20, 2015, accessed February 22, 2015, www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/20/brief-wondrous-life-of-oscar-wao-novel-21st-century-best-junot-diaz.

8 Stavans, ed., *Norton Anthology of Latino Literature*, liii.
9 Díaz, *Oscar Wao*, 1, 4.
10 Díaz, *Oscar Wao*, 1.
11 Danticat, "Junot Díaz by Edwidge Danticat."
12 Díaz, *Oscar Wao*, 184, 20, 43, 190.
13 Gloria E. Anzaldúa coined the term *autohistoriateoría* to describe women-of-color's interventions into and transformations of traditional Western autobiographical forms.
14 Díaz, *Oscar Wao*, 55, 60, 72, 127, 142, 159.
15 Díaz, *Oscar Wao*, 180.
16 Díaz, *Oscar Wao*, 2–3n1.
17 Díaz, *Oscar Wao*, 224–25n27.
18 Díaz, "Q&A."
19 The late Oscar Hijuelos was the first US Latinx writer to win the Pulitzer Prize, for his 1989 novel *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*.
20 In his iconic 1963 essay on Richard Wright, "Black Boys and Native Sons," Irving Howe claimed that "the day *Native Son* appeared American culture was changed 'forever.'" In much the same way that Howe envisioned Wright's text reinvigorating African American, Anglo American, and modernist traditions, thereby integrally connecting the US Black experience to the experiences of other cultures, I argue that the day Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* appeared likewise changed forever American culture by broadening the interconnections of Afro-Atlantic Latinx, Anglo American, Greater Antillean, and Latin American experiences, along with transmodernist literary traditions, at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons," 100.
21 For a similar argument about Latin American literature (after 1987) as an exemplary world literature, see Hoyos, *Beyond Bolaño*.
22 Díaz, email message to author, March 28, 2013.
23 Quoted in Ch'ien, *Weird English*, 212.
24 Sam Anderson, "Junot Díaz Hates Writing Short Stories," *New York Times Magazine*, September 27, 2012, accessed October 20, 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/30/magazine/junot-diaz-hates-writing-short-stories.html.
25 Danticat, "Junot Díaz by Edwidge Danticat."
26 Anderson, "Junot Díaz Hates Writing Short Stories."
27 Díaz, email message to author, June 28, 2015.
28 Jeffrey Pierre, "Authors Junot Díaz, Edwidge Danticat Decry Dominican Efforts to Remove Haitians," *Miami Herald*, June 24, 2015, accessed July 12, 2015, www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/haiti/article25460362.html.
29 Pierre, "Authors Junot Díaz, Edwidge Danticat Decry Dominican Efforts to Remove Haitians."
30 Pierre, "Authors Junot Díaz, Edwidge Danticat Decry Dominican Efforts to Remove Haitians."
31 Pierre, "Authors Junot Díaz, Edwidge Danticat Decry Dominican Efforts to Remove Haitians."

32 Sibylla Brodzinsky, "Dominicans of Haitian Descent Fear Mass Deportation as Deadline Looms," *Guardian*, June 16, 2015, accessed September 23, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/16/dominican-republic-haiti-deportation-residency-permits.

33 Díaz, *Oscar Wao*, 273.

34 See Ramírez, "Great Men's Magic."

35 Field notes, September 3, 2015, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.

36 See Julia Alvarez's historical novel about the Mirabal sisters and their murders: *In the Time of the Butterflies*.

37 Ch'ien, *Weird English*, 222, 322n41.

38 DiTrapano, "A Brief History of Junot Díaz," 100–102, 130.

39 Ch'ien, *Weird English*, 223.

40 Ch'ien, *Weird English*, 222.

41 Junot Díaz, email message to the author, March 28, 2013. Díaz, it turned out, needed one class to complete an additional degree in history.

42 See Junot Díaz's opening remarks for his conversation with Toni Morrison at the New York Public Library on December 13, 2013. Díaz, "Conversation with Toni Morrison."

43 O'Neill, "Junot Díaz on the Game of Fiction and Intimacy."

44 The only story from Junot Díaz's 1995 MFA thesis that did not appear in *Drown* was "London Terrace." It appeared under the new title "Invierno" in *This Is How You Lose Her*, published in 2012.

45 See the interview with Díaz's literary agent Nicole Aragi. Lee, "Literary Culture Clash." Like the late literary superagent Carmen Balcells—who represented the Latin American Boom writers Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar, and Mario Vargas Llosa, among others—Aragi is one of the US's most influential literary agents of our times. Many of the US writers she represents and works with are radical experimenters—Edwidge Danticat, Colson Whitehead, and Alexander Heiman—but first they are young, brash, and smart, and they have all been awarded MacArthur Fellowships. Briefly, Aragi—via Libya, Lebanon, London, and New York—has become known for the range and diversity of the US literary voices she has helped introduce to world literature. As she notes, Junot Díaz was "a very early client" who helped her emerge as an agent: "I feel like [Díaz's] first story collection [*Drown*] was when editors began, for the first time, returning my calls with any speed." Aragi, quoted in Lee, "Literary Culture Clash."

46 Díaz, "Global Dystopias, Critical Dystopias."

47 National Institute of National Policy.

48 Quoted in Lavanya Ramanathan, "Artists in the Age of Trump," *Washington Post Magazine*, July 27, 2017, www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/the-cauldron-of-creation/2017/07/26/f83a3bfa-61ba-11e7-84a1-a26b75ad39fe_story.html.

49 Glass, "Literary Giants Junot Díaz and Toni Morrison on Their Refusal to Surrender."

50 For a trenchant analysis of Díaz's activism at Rutgers and Cornell (and beyond), see Dávila, "Against the 'Discursive Latino.'"

51 Grandin, "Junot Díaz Just Lost an Award for Speaking Out against the Dominican Republic's Anti-Haitian Pogrom."

52 Grandin, "Junot Díaz Just Lost an Award for Speaking Out against the Dominican Republic's Anti-Haitian Pogrom."

53 In a Univision interview on November 12, 2015, Díaz, alas, responded to Selman by saying, "I'm not going to be silenced because someone's taking away an award. I've been in this country how many years now, and when people want to silence you, they'll give you a fuetazo [lash]." Díaz, who described himself as "nothing big, just a small-time writer," was not worried about Selman's weak threat because he had been through worse. Simón, "Junot Díaz Won't Back Down from Criticizing DR's Immigration Crisis."

54 See Iser, *Act of Reading*; and Fluck, "Role of the Reader and the Changing Functions of Literature."

55 Moya, "Search for Decolonial Love, Parts I and II."

56 According to Díaz, "The footnotes are there for a number of reasons; primarily, to create a double narrative. The footnotes, which are in the lower frequencies, challenge the main text, which is the higher narrative. The footnotes are like the voice of the jester, contesting the proclamations of the king. In a book that's all about the dangers of dictatorship, the dangers of the single voice—this felt like a smart move to me." O'Rourke, "Questions for Junot Díaz."

57 Díaz, *Oscar Wao*, 20–21n6.

58 McGurl, *Program Era*.

1. "WRESTLING WITH J. R. R. TOLKIEN'S LORD OF THE RINGS"

1 To read the fruits of our Junot Díaz Symposium, see Hanna, Harford Vargas, and Saldívar, eds., *Junot Díaz and the Decolonial Imagination*. Our book considers how Díaz's writing illuminates the world of Latinx cultural expression and trans-American and diasporic literary history. Interested in conceptualizing Díaz's decolonial imagination and his radically reenvisioned world, the contributors show how his aesthetic and activist practices reflect a significant shift in American letters toward a hemispheric and planetary culture. We examine the intersections of race, Afro-Latinidad, gender, sexuality, disability, poverty, and power in Díaz's work. Collectively, we situated Díaz's writing in relation to American and Latin American literary practices and reveal the author's activist investments. The book concludes with Paula M. L. Moya's interview with Díaz. The entire interview is cited frequently in this book: Moya, "Search for Decolonial Love, Parts I and II." I want to give my mil gracias to my coeditors, Jennifer Harford Vargas and Monica Hanna, and to the contributors, Glenda R. Carpio, Arlene Dávila, Lyn Di Iorio, Junot Díaz, Ylce Irizarry, Claudia Milian, Julie Avril Minich, Paula M. L. Moya, Sarah Quesada, Ramón Saldívar, Silvio Torres-Saillant, and Deborah R. Vargas, for their splendid contributions to the book and for helping me hone in on the complexities and joys of Díaz's imaginative work. When Duke University Press sent Díaz copies of our book on January 15, 2016, he posted a photograph and generous comments on his Facebook page. One couldn't dream of a better critical reception.